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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

EFFECTS OF CONTROLLABILITY ON RESPONSIBILITY ATTRIBUTION AND CORRECTIVE SOLUTION.

BY

OWEN LAI TIN YUN

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL, 1988

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Effects of Controllability On Responsibility Attribution And Corrective Solution submitted by Owen Lai Tin Yun in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Education.

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ABSTRACT

Mitchell, Green, and Wood's (1980) attributional model of a leader's response to a subordinate's poor performance has been a fundamental model for describing and understanding the leader-member interaction. However, most of the organizational attribution theory research have mainly focused on the attribution of causality (i.e. locus and stability). This study is designed to investigate the aspect of responsibility and its relationship between controllability and the subsequent response. Sixty-eight participants were asked to use the critical incident approach to describe an incident of poor performance and then rate the poor performance in terms of personal responsibility and organizational responsibility. The descriptions of poor performance were also rated by trained raters in light of personal and organizational controllability. The results of this study indicate that controllability and responsibility are positively correlated. One key contribution of the present study is its attempt to examine attribution outside the realm of locus and stability which has been the main focus in many attribution research.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER PAGE

1. INTRODUCTION..... 1

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE..... 4

Development of Attributional Research..... 4

Attributional-Theory Research in Organizations..... 9

Limitation Of Weiner's 2 X 2 Taxonomic Scheme.....15

The Issue: Responsibility In Determining Attribution.....17

Shortcomings Of Current Organizational Attribution Research.....24

Research Questions.....26

3. METHOD.....28

Subjects.....28

Procedure.....29

Questionnaire.....30

Measures.....31

Responsibility Scale.....31

Solution Scale.....32

Controllability Scale.....33

4. RESULT.....35

5. DISCUSSION.....39

LIST OF TABLE.....44

LIST OF FIGURES.....45

REFERENCES.....47

APPENDIX 1.....54

LIST OF TABLE

Table		Page
I	Correlation Coefficients Between Responsibility, Controllability And Emotional Impact Regarding Solution.	44

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
I	Mitchell's Attributional Model Of A Leader's Response To A Subordinate's Poor Performance.	45
II	Relationship Between Causality, Responsibility, and Solution.	46

Introduction

According to Pepition (1981), "Now in the 1980's, attribution theory is probably the most prominent and active area in social psychology" (p. 982). Attributional processes are cognitive, informational processes that interpret the causes of behavior, reduce ambiguity, and predict human reactions. As a result, attributions are considered to be a key element in the phenomenological understanding of one's own, as well as other's, social behavior.

Attribution theory has been employed to examine an array of applied problems. Frieze, Bar-Tal, and Carroll (1979) and Kelley and Michela (1980) have documented applications of attribution theory in such diverse areas as education, sport, clinical and counselling psychology, interpersonal relations, and environmental psychology. In recent years, attribution theory has been applied in the organizational setting to investigate various aspects of organizational behavior; such as leadership, performance appraisal, supervisory control and action, and performance expectations (Brown, 1984; Green, Fairhurst & Snavely, 1986; Green & Liden, 1980; Green & Mitchell, 1979;

Ilgen, Mitchell & Fredrickson, 1981; Mitchell & Wood, 1980; Porac, Ferris & Fedor, 1983; Wood & Mitchell, 1981). These research endeavors have added insight and understanding to the interactions between leaders and subordinates in the workplace.

Although causal attribution appears to be a salient factor which influences leaders' behavior toward subordinates, research results regarding the effects of causal attribution on leaders' solutions to performance deficits have been inconclusive. Mitchell (1982) has suggested that the leader's causal attribution and action processes are moderated by several factors which include perception of responsibility, organizational policy, cost and benefits of the action, and social context.

The purpose of this study is to investigate aspects of responsibility and controllability which have only been dealt with briefly in the organizational context. The dimension of controllability, which refers to the degree of volitional influence that can be exerted over a cause (Weiner, 1985), will also be explored in order to examine its relationship with responsibility attribution. The Attribution of responsibility and controllability in this study will

be ascribed along two separate continua, person and organization, so that the attribution can be more comprehensive than the unidimensional scale in which person and organization are placed at opposite ends of the same continuum. This study attempts to explore the relationship among responsibility attribution, controllability, and corrective actions within the separate continua of person and organization.

Review of Literature

Development of Attributional Research

Historically, attribution theory has developed out of the area of person perception in social psychology. The theoretical progress of attribution theory is best identified with the work of Kelley (1967, 1972, 1973), Jones and Davis (1965), and especially Heider (1944, 1958). Contemporary attribution theory is founded on the comprehensive theoretical work of Fritz Heider (1944, 1955) which dealt with two essential elements of attribution: judgments of intention and the making of dispositional attribution. Heider examined how perceivers made judgments of causality through phenomenal perceptions in which persons were not involved. In his later work, Heider (1958) placed less emphasis upon the factors that might produce over-attribution to personal causality than upon the rational process involved in distinguishing among varying degrees of personal responsibility. According to Heider's (1958) theory, the ordinary perceiver's analysis of action distinguishes dispositional aspects of personal force (i.e. ability, power, intention), from dispositional aspects of environmental force (i.e.

task difficulty, opportunity, or luck). He suggested that these two general classes of forces, personal and environmental, entered into the production of action, and that the amount of personal causality attributed would vary with the estimated extent to which personal force had determined the effects (Shaver, 1975). Heider's attribution theory therefore, ascribed causality of behaviors to either situational or personal forces.

In order to clarify some of Heider's ideas, Jones & Davis (1965) proposed the "correspondent inference theory" which postulated that each particular cause of action was the result of foreknowledge of the consequence of one's behavior, requisite ability, and an intention to produce such consequences. In regard to an action, perceivers could use their own experience to reconstruct what effects would be likely, to identify the effect that would be common to all choices, and to isolate those effects unique to the courses of action. Hence, the perceiver could have a high degree of certainty regarding personal disposition, if these unique effects were few in number and low in assumed desirability (Shaver, 1986).

The principle of covariation between potential causes and effects was the central theme of Kelley's (1967, 1972, 1973) attribution theory. Derived mainly from the original work of Heider, Kelley's theory employed a three dimensional model consisting of: (a) entities, (b) context (designated as time/modality), and (c) persons. The dimension of entities represented incidents in the environment which were under attributional consideration at the time. The contextual dimension, in terms of time/modality, represented the possible modes of interaction which could occur. The third dimension, persons, includes the self, the actor, and other persons whose interaction with the entities formed the basis of consensus. Based on this three dimensional model, one could acquire information cues on a particular behavior through: (a) the distinctiveness of a response to a particular entity (task), (b) the consistency of a behavior in other contexts (situations) or at another time, and (c) the consensus of a response shared by other persons. Processing information in the framework of these three dimensions, one could apply covariation analysis to determine causality of a behavior. For example, a particular behavior represented by low

distinctiveness, high consistency, and low consensus will be explained in terms of person attribution; whereas a behavior demonstrating high distinctiveness, low consistency, and high consensus will be ascribed to situational attribution. Thus, Kelley's three dimensional covariation model allowed for a great variety of data patterns which do not lead to clear attributional interpretations because of multiple causations.

Although Kelley's covariation model, can be utilized to formulate attributions, it is clearly a theoretical model and not descriptive of most informal daily attributions. It is unlikely that one will go through such a detailed process of analysis every time an attribution is formed because of time constraints and limited observational opportunities. As a result, one may resort to an information-processing shortcut (a causal schema) to judge cause and effect. According to Kelley, (1972) a causal schema is a conception of the manner in which two or more causal factors interact in relation to a particular effect. Causal schemata are of various forms, each appropriate to particular cause and effect circumstances. Providing a framework within which bits and pieces of relevant information

can be fitted to draw reasonably good causal inferences, these causal schemata enable a solution for economical and rapid attributional analysis.

Weiner (1972) proposed a causal schema that is pertinent to the attribution of success and failure in achievement-related tasks. Four salient causal categories of effort, ability, task difficulty, and luck in achievement-related contexts were examined in terms of the theoretical dimensions of locus of causality and temporal stability. The dimension of locus of causality, consistent with Rotter's (1966) notion of internal-external locus of control distinguished between variables that are internal to the individual (ability and effort) and those that are external (task difficulty and luck). In light of Weiner's 2 x 2 taxonomic scheme, ability was classified as internal and stable, effort as internal and unstable, task difficulty as external and stable, and luck as external and unstable (Weiner, 1972). This 2 x 2 categorization scheme has been a principal theoretical framework for attribution-theory research studies in achievement motivation. A review of pertinent studies regarding perceived causes of success and failure in school achievement (Weiner, 1985)

indicated that ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck were the most salient factors within the achievement context. The most dominant of these causes were ability and effort. Success was ascribed to high ability and hard work, while failure was attributed to low ability and the lack of trying. Although Weiner's casual schema has been mainly used in achievement and motivation research, his 2 x 2 taxonomy has also been applied in recent studies conducted outside of achievement-related contexts. (i.e. Porac, Nottenbury, & Eggert, 1981).

Attributional-Theory Research in Organizations

Over the last four decades, most of the attribution-theory research has been conducted in the domains of social and cognitive psychology. A large amount of published work has focused on describing the major elements of the attribution domain and investigating the causal inference and response ensembles. Attribution theory research in the organizational setting, specifically in leader-subordinate interaction, was initially examined by Mitchell (1979). Attribution theory has since been presented as a vehicle for describing and understanding

the causes of leader behavior in leader-member interactions (Green & Mitchell, 1979).

Based on Weiner's 2 x 2 taxonomic scheme, Mitchell (1979) proposed a two step attribution model (figure 1) which involves sorting through a variety of informational cues and making an attribution, and then choosing an action in response to the antecedent behavior. Mitchell's attributional model has included both attribution and attributional theories which were presented by Kelly & Michela (1980) as two classes of theories pertinent to understanding the role of attributions in social behavior. Attribution theories refer to those that deal with the determinants of causal inferences, including such antecedents as information, beliefs, and motivation. Attributional theories refer to those that predict the effects of causal inference including such consequences as behavior, affect, and expectations (Ostorm, 1982)

Insert Figure One Here

The early research efforts of Mitchell (1977) focused on how leaders form attributions in response to incidents of a subordinate's poor performance. Since 1980, the emphasis of research has concentrated on predicting the leader's response to the subordinate's poor performance (Mitchell, Green, & Wood, 1981). During the past decade, a series of laboratory and field studies have been conducted in an effort to validate Mitchell's model (1980). Attribution-theory research on supervisory actions dealing with poor performance have yielded the following major findings:

1. In an incident of poor performance, supervisors tended to attribute causality more to internal factors than external factors regardless of the surrounding circumstances, whereas subordinates tended to see their own poor performance as externally caused. This finding was consistent with the phenomenon of actor-observer error (Jones & Nisbett, 1972).

2. Supervisors' biases toward internal attributions were increased when the subordinate's work history (as reflected by the three types of informational cues of

consistency, consensus, and distinctiveness) was poor and the outcome of the poor performance was serious. In terms of the effects of the three informational cues used in causal attributions, a number of studies indicated that consensus information was the weakest cue (Nisbett & Borgida, 1975) because leaders tended to use self-based consensus information as opposed to sample-based consensus information (Hansen & Lowe, 1976).

3. Responses to poor performance were related to the attributions made by the supervisors; the more internal the attribution, the more the response tended to be punitive and directed to the subordinate.

4. Given the same performance, a supervisor would make more extreme evaluations based on an effort attribution than an ability attribution. An attribution to effort led to higher evaluations when performance was high and to lower evaluations when performance was low than did an attribution to ability (Knowlton & Mitchell, 1980).

In a summary of leader-subordinate research, Mitchell (1982) indicated that there were a number of salient factors that moderate both the subordinate behavior - leader attribution link and the leader attribution - leader response link. Six moderators of the subordinate behavior - leader attribution link included: (a) leader use of self-based consensus information instead of sample-based consensus information when analyzing consensus information; (b) the leader as an observer committing the actor-observer error; (c) the leader's self-serving or ego-biasing motive attributing subordinate's poor performance to internal causes and the success of subordinates to external causes; (d) the extent of actor-observer bias was affected by the relationship between leader and subordinate; i.e. empathy, similarity, and liking (Banks, 1976; Regan, Straus & Fazio, 1974; Regan & Totten, 1975); (e) personal characteristics such as sex and race affecting causal explanations in forms of stereotyping and prejudice (Deaux & Emswiller, 1974; Garland & Price, 1977), and (f) performances consistent with the expectations of the leader would lead to an internal attribution, whereas performances that were

inconsistent with the leader's expectations would be attributed externally.

In the leader attribution-leader response process, the leader's actions were moderated by eight factors: (a) the perception of multiple causes discounted the role of any given causes (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975; Kelley, 1973), thus multiple causation will increase the leader's uncertainty in making a response; (b) the leader's perception of responsibility; (c) the outcome valence of the poor performance (Mitchell & Wood, 1980; Shaver, 1975); (d) apologies to the leader's responses (Mitchell, 1982; Mitchell & Wood, 1981); (e) the social context (e.g. appropriateness of control responses) (Green & Leden, 1982); (f) the cost and benefits of various actions (Heerwagen, 1982); and (g) organizational policy.

The subordinate behavior - leader attribution moderators were seen mainly as error factors which could lead to an incorrect analysis of causality. The moderators acting upon the second link, leader attribution - leader behavior, were better seen as legitimate concerns which temper the leader's response to his causal analysis (Green & Mitchell, 1979). Michell (1982) also concluded that causal attributions

were only one of the contributors, perhaps even a minor one, to leader response because other moderating factors such as contextual, social, cost/benefit, perception of responsibility were as important as, or more important than, attribution. As a result, Mitchell (1982) has suggested that more research is needed in this area.

Limitation of Weiner's 2 x 2 Taxonomic Scheme

The theoretical framework of organizational attribution research during the last decade has primarily been based on Weiner's (1972) 2 x 2 categorization scheme. A survey of attribution research in organization has indicated that the majority of studies examined causal attribution in terms of the locus (internal/external) dimension. A subordinate's poor performance has usually been attributed to causes that are either internal (e.g. ability, effort, skill,) or external (e.g. task difficulty, supervision, environmental factors). Although Weiner's 2 x 2 taxonomic scheme has been a theoretical foundation for numerous attribution-theory studies, many short-comings of this classification system (i.e. unable to categorize causal statements

which include factors existing beyond this two dimensions) have been noted (Weiner, 1985).

In response to the noted deficiencies in Weiner's 2 x 2 model, Rosenbaum's (1972) third causal dimension of controllability was proposed and incorporated to form a three-dimensional taxonomy in order to clarify and expand the causal dimension. Controllability referred to the degree of volitional influence that can be exerted over a cause (Weiner, 1985). Rosenbaum (1972) indicated that there was a distinguishable difference between internal variables. Mood and fatigue, for example, were considered internal, unstable, and non-volitional causes; whereas effort was also considered also internal, unstable, and yet it was under volitional control. Since the controllability was related to sentiments and evaluations of others, the addition of the controllability dimension explained why people were typically held more responsible for some internal causes (e.g. laziness) than for the effects of other internal causes (e.g. illness).

Weiner's (1985) review of empirical research in social psychology concerning causal structure strongly indicated that locus, stability, and controllability were the three key causal dimensions consistently

employed in causal analysis. Consequently, organizational attribution research should incorporate the dimension of controllability into its theoretical structure so that the analysis of attribution will be more comprehensive. The dimension of controllability is also essential to the attribution of responsibility because the assessment of moral responsibility depends on the degree of volitional control. An individual is usually held more responsible for causes that he has control over than causes that are beyond his control. As a result, exploring the aspect of responsibility attribution within the dimension of controllability should provide new insight and knowledge to organizational attribution research, especially in the area of leader attribution and consequent response which is illustrated in the second link of Mitchell's attributional model.

The Issue: Responsibility In Determining Attribution

According to Mitchell's two step attributional model, perception of responsibility was one of the moderators in the leader attribution - leader behavior link. However, there was a lack of empirical investigation to determine the influence of

responsibility attribution on leader responses. A survey of attribution-theory research conducted in the organizational setting showed that attribution of responsibility received very limited research attention (only Green & Liden's study, 1980, included subordinate responsibility as one of the measures). The lack of research investigation relative to the attribution of responsibility may be partially due to the fact that it has been considered synonymous to the attribution of causality. Most studies have mainly focused on the attribution of causality in terms of locus dimension (internal/external). The causal attribution of an incident of poor performance was ascribed either to internal causes (e.g. personality, ability, effort) or causes external to the subordinate (e.g. a difficult task, lack of support, insufficient information).

Despite a wealth of empirical findings, little has been done to clarify the process of responsibility attribution, partly because fundamental conceptual issues regarding the notion of responsibility remain implicit in the literature, or, where articulated, have been dealt with only superficially (Fincham & Jaspars, 1980). Hart (1968) suggested that responsibility can generally be interpreted in the notions of role

responsibility, causal responsibility, capacity responsibility, and moral responsibility. In terms of role responsibility, a person was considered bound to perform the duties legitimately attached to his or her "distinctive place or office in a social organization" (Hart, 1968). For example, President Ronald Reagan of the United States was ultimately held responsible for the recent downing of the Iranian commercial airbus over the Persian Gulf because of his role as the head of state. Therefore, a person can be held accountable for an event not causally connected to him or her in any way. Causal responsibility refers to the extent to which the agent was the cause of some outcome. The term "causal responsibility" and "causality" have a great degree of conceptual similarity because the phrase "was responsible for" is interchangeable with "produced". However, this interpretation of responsibility does not ascribe intention nor motivation to the actor. In fact, the actor need not be aware of producing the outcome, although the causal connection would be obvious to an observer. Shaver (1986) considered causal responsibility equivalent to the identification of the minimally sufficient causal subset. For example, the driver of an automobile was

causally responsible for the traffic accident because he or she was one of the many causal agents of some outcome. However, the driver may not be blamed for the accident when all factors are considered. The concept of capacity responsibility explicates the phrase "he is responsible for his actions" (Shaver, 1986). According to Hart (1968), the capacities in question were those of understanding, reasoning, and control of conduct: the ability to understand what conduct legal rules or morality required, to deliberate and reach decisions concerning these requirements, and to conform to decisions when made. Thus, an absence of one or more of these capacities may result in verdicts such as not guilty by reason of insanity, and incapable of understanding moral principles because of young age. Moral responsibility, according to Hart, was assigned in the moral realm when the actor was causally connected and possessed capacity responsibility - specifically, the knowledge of the potential wrongfulness of the action, and the self-control required to avoid the negative outcome. Thus, moral responsibility could be ascribed once causal responsibility and capacity responsibility were determined. Moreover, moral responsibility related to

the extent to which the agent was deserving blame for the negative outcome.

In general, whenever the word "responsibility" is used in an unspecified form, it also refers to Hart's notion of moral responsibility which will lead to an assignment of blame. It is important to notice that although the word "responsibility" is considered synonymous to causality, the two are not identical. For example, when an employee fails to meet a deadline due to an injury, he or she is not morally held responsible for missing the deadline. An attribution of causality can be thought of only as a necessary precondition for an attribution of moral responsibility (Shaver, 1986). As a result, causality, which Shaver considered equivalent to causal responsibility, is one of the criteria for attribution of moral responsibility. Likewise, causal responsibility is a subset of moral responsibility because the attribution of moral responsibility requires the presence of causal responsibility and capacity responsibility. According to Shaver, the attribution process for a negative occurrence began with the attribution of causality (or causal responsibility), then shifted to the attribution of responsibility (or moral responsibility), and ended

with the determination of blameworthiness and correspondent action

In the event of a poor performance, the critical questions about who is responsible do not only arise as the natural consequence of an observation of causality, but also from a need, after the fact, to identify someone who can be held accountable. In the minds of the superiors, the issue is not causality but moral responsibility. For example, an individual who is seen as performing poorly because of lack of effort due to a sick child at home will be treated differently than if the lack of effort is ascribed to a hangover from an all night party. Consequently, the attribution of responsibility will be a pertinent factor which influences leader responses after the identification of causal factors for the poor performance. In sum, the process of attribution and action can be illustrated by figure 2.

Insert Figure Two Here

Responsibility attribution research in social psychology has concentrated primarily on two areas of experimentation, that is, exploration of Heider's proposed developmental stages of responsibility attribution, and assessment of responsibility attribution for an accidental occurrence. Studies of outcome attributions and helping behavior (Berkowitz, 1969; Piliavin & Rodin, 1969) have indicated that assistance for the individual was more likely when the individual was not perceived as morally responsible for the outcome, whereas assistance was withheld if the individual was perceived as responsible.

In recent years, attributional research in organizations has switched its focus from the causes of attribution to the consequences of attribution. Attempts to relate causal attribution to control actions by researcher have resulted in only moderate success (Mitchell et al, 1982; Ilgen & Knowlton, 1981; Philips & Lord, 1981).

Attribution of responsibility between subordinates and the organization may be able to shed new insight on poor performance and consequent responses. In the event of a poor performance, the various degrees of moral responsibility ascribed to the subordinate, the

organizational structure and the environment will be determining factors in choosing corrective actions. The attribution of responsibility between the person and the organization should be distributed along two separate continua because it is not unusual for both the person and the organization to share a certain degree of responsibility for a specific outcome. As a result, the person and the organization need not be placed at opposite ends of a continuum in terms of responsibility attribution.

Shortcomings of Current Organizational Attribution Research

A number of shortcomings were revealed from the review of the organizational attribution theory research. There is a lack of empirical studies which have investigated the attribution of responsibility and its influences on subsequent actions. Most of the organizational attribution research was theoretically based on Weiner's two categories of causal dimensions (i.e. locus and stability) which had a number of weaknesses. Few studies have explored the dimension of controllability to determine the extent of personal responsibility. Most studies have been experimental in nature, as well as involving students; therefore the

generalizability of results to real-life situations has been limited. Field studies of the attributional process in organizations are needed to enhance generalizability of research in this area. While Mitchell and Wood (1980) have found fairly high correlations between summary scales measuring attributions and solutions to poor performance (r = .55), the proposition that attributions are directly related to responses (Jones, 1976; Mitchell & Wood, 1980) has not been investigated in an organizational setting. With the exception of studies on poor group performance reported by Brown (1984) and Porac (1983), no empirical studies have focused on the attributional process of members of organizations.

In response to the need for field research investigating the attributional process within organizations the present study examined the relationships among organizational members' attribution of responsibility, controllability of causes leading to poor performance, and the emotional impact of proposed solutions. Since controllability was considered to be a major moderator of moral responsibility attribution, this study will explore the relationship between perceived controllability and perception of overall

responsibility, which should provide insight and needed information about the attributional process in organizational settings.

Research Questions:

This study was designed to examine the relationship between the aspects of responsibility and controllability in the dimensions of person and organization. It also explored the relationship between the attributions of responsibility and the subsequent corrective solutions. This study addressed the following research questions: (1) When the co-worker is perceived to have a high degree of control over the causes of his or her own poor performance, will the co-worker be held more responsible by the rater for the poor performance? (2) When the organization is rated to have a high degree of control over the causes of the employee's poor performance, will the organization be held responsible by the rater for the poor performance of the co-worker? (3) In general, is there an inverse relationship between the dimension of personal responsibility and organizational responsibility? (4) When the co-worker is held responsible by the rater for poor performance, will the

proposed corrective solution cause the co-worker to experience greater negative emotional impact?

METHOD

Subjects:

The sixty-eight subjects of this study were full-time employees of 49 different provincial and municipal government agencies. These participants had enrolled in a management certificate course for practicing managers. Fifty percent of the subjects were females and fifty percent were males. The age range was from 25 to 56 years with a mean age of 36.7 years. The participants' years of employment at the present agency were 1 to 19 years with a mean of 6.7 employment years. The size of department ranged from 1 to 18 persons with a mean size of 4.7 persons, and 3/4 of the subjects had supervised 1 to 2 persons in their department.

At the outset of the instructional program, these participants were asked to complete a four-page questionnaire regarding the causes of poor performance of a coworker and the subsequent corrective actions as part of the class exercise in order to recognize the effect of attribution theory in the organizational setting. The subjects were told that they were not graded by the content of the questionnaire, and the

information regarding the individual and the organization would be kept anonymous. The participants were also informed that the instructor-author was involved in a research project and intended to publish the research findings.

Procedure:

Each participant was asked to select a co-worker whose performance was perceived by the participant as "could be improved". The person selected was to be an immediate subordinate or a co-worker who was holding a job with which the participant was familiar. Participants were also asked to avoid selecting co-worker who were close to retirement or who were performing at the "bottom of the barrel" in order to eliminate the selection of extreme poor performers. The participants were asked to use the critical incident method to describe an incident of poor performance and analyze the situation by providing up to six reasons explaining why the person performed as he or she did. The various suggested reasons for poor performance were also rated by the participants in terms of personal responsibility and organizational responsibility. The participants were then asked to propose two corrective

solutions (restricted and unrestricted) to the poor performance, as well as to rate the emotional impact elicited by the proposed solutions. After the participants returned the four-page questionnaire, the attributional statements made by the participants were rewritten to disguise references to the persons who made the attribution. These rewritten attributional statements were then rated in terms of personal controllability and organizational controllability by two trained raters.

Questionnaire:

The questionnaire was developed by Rasmussen (1987) to be employed in a series of attribution studies in organizational settings. The questionnaire was similar to the one utilized in Mitchell & Wood's 1980 study except this questionnaire took an open-ended approach instead of a reconstructed scenario approach. The participants were asked to write down and rate their attributions of poor performance and proposed solutions. Although this questionnaire had not been subjected to formal testing of validity and reliability, the questionnaire seemed to have both face validity and content validity. This questionnaire has

also been employed in several studies (Rasmussen & Hegedus, 1986) and the data collected appeared to be reliable and valid. This four-page questionnaire (see appendix) contained open-ended sections for attributions of poor performance, rating of personal responsibility and organizational responsibility, proposed corrective solutions, and a demographic section.

Measures:

Responsibility Scale:

Based on the given reasons, the participants rated: (a) the degree of personal responsibility (the jobholder is to some degree at fault or personally responsible for the below-par performance); and (b) the degree of organizational responsibility (e.g., the nature of the job, supervision, reward system). The subjects were instructed to rate the reasons in both the dimensions of personal responsibility and organizational responsibility which implied that either the person or the organization or both could be responsible for the below par performance. The rating of responsibility was scaled from 1 to 5, 1 being not at all responsible and 5 being very much responsible.

For example, a rating of 5 in the personal responsibility scale and 1 in the organizational responsibility scale implied that the person was very much responsible for the poor performance whereas the organizational management system was not at all responsible; a rating of 5 in both the personal responsibility and organizational responsibility scales indicated both the person and the organization were very much responsible for the below-par performance. In sum, the responsibility scale measured the overall responsibility of the co-workers and the organizations in regard to incidents of poor performance.

Solution Scale:

Following the behavioral description of the co-worker's below-par performance, the participants were asked to suggest solutions for the poor performance. The solutions were given in the context of the following conditions: (a) assuming that one was in a position of total power and had unlimited resources in the organization, (b) within the practical realities of the organization. The suggested solutions were then assessed by the participants in terms of positive or negative emotional impact on the co-worker when he or

she was informed of it. A rating of -5 on the solution scale implied a very negative emotional impact from the perspective of the co-worker, whereas a rating of +5 indicated a very positive emotional impact to the co-worker. Thus, the solution scale reflected the punitiveness of the corrective solutions proposed by the participants.

Controllability Scale:

The 68 participants in the study made a total of 266 statements of which 43 were deleted due to ambiguity (e.g. the cause of poor performance is "unorganized" but did not specify which party is being unorganized) or because the statement did not make sense in reference to the cause of poor performance (e.g. dedicated to the job and department). Two raters classified these attributional statements into categories 1 and 2, which represented low and high controllability respectively. The degree of controllability was rated in both the personal and organizational dimensions. For example, a rating of 2 on both personal controllability and organizational controllability implied that both the person and the organization had a high degree of control over the

causes leading to poor performance. A rating of 1 on personal controllability and 2 on organizational controllability implied that the person had little control over the causes while the organization had a high degree of control over the causes affecting the performance. The two raters had been part of the research team and meeting regularly over a period of six months. As a result, they had a sound theoretical background of the current attribution literature within the organizational context. The criteria of controllability rating was provided during a two-hour training session. The raters were instructed to take a moderate approach and consider the various practical realities encountered by organizations when rating the attribution statements. Due to the conceptual similarity between the notion of responsibility and controllability, the raters were asked to rate in light of control rather than responsibility. The percentage of agreement between the two raters was 87.9% in personal controllability and 76.7% in organizational controllability. The controllability scale measured the co-workers' and the organization's controllability over the causes affecting performance perceived by the raters.

RESULT

Personal Controllability And Perceptions Of Co-worker's Responsibility

The first research question asked whether the co-worker would be held more responsible for the poor performance by the rater when the co-worker was perceived to have a high degree of control over the causes of his or her own poor performance. An analysis of variance between the high personal controllability group and the low personal controllability group indicated that the perception of personal responsibility was rated significantly higher for the high controllability group than the low controllability group $F(1, 222) = 67.11$, $p < .01$. Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to examine the relationship between personal controllability and perceived personal responsibility. A Pearson Product Moment Correlation of $r = .49$, $p = <.05$ indicated a significant correlation between personal controllability and perceived personal responsibility.

Insert Table Two Here

Organizational Controllability And Perception Of Organizational Responsibility

The second research question investigated whether the organization was being held responsible for the employee's poor performance when the organization was rated to have a high degree of control over the causes leading to the employee's poor performance. An analysis of variance between the high organizational controllability group and the low organizational controllability group indicated that the perception of organizational responsibility was rated significantly higher for the high controllability group than the low controllability group $F(1, 222) = 76.65$, $p < .01$. A Pearson Product Moment Correlation of $r = .51$, $p = < .05$ also indicated a significant correlation between organizational controllability and perceived organizational responsibility.

The Dimensions of Personal Responsibility and Organizational Responsibility

Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to examine the third research question of whether personal responsibility dimension and organizational responsibility dimension were inversely related. The ratings of personal responsibility and organizational responsibility were correlated at $r = -.46$, $p = <.05$, which suggested that there is an inverse relationship between these two dimensions. Pearson Product Moment Correlation also yielded a significant negative correlation coefficient ($r = -.45$, $p < .05$) between the ratings of personal responsibility and organizational controllability. However, the Pearson's r between organizational responsibility and personal controllability did not yeild a statistically significant relationship.

Perception Of Responsibility And Emotional Impact Of Corrective Solution

The fourth research question investigated whether there was a positive relationship between the perceived responsibility and the emotional impact of the

suggested corrective solution. It suggested that the more the co-worker is held responsible by the rater for poor performance, the more punitive the proposed corrective solution which will cause the co-worker to experience greater negative emotional impact. However, the Person Product Moment Correlation between perceived responsibility and rating of emotional impact due to suggested solution yield no support for the above position. There is no significant correlation between perception of responsibility and suggested corrective solution nor between controllability and proposed solution despite whether the corrective solution is restrictive or non-restrictive.

Discussion

One key contribution of the present study is its attempt to investigate attribution outside the realm of locus and stability which has been the main focus in most attribution research. This study examines the relationship between controllability of the causes leading to poor performances and responsibility attribution made by organization members. Exploring the notion of responsibility, this research not only examines the aspect of causal responsibility which is conceptually similar to causality, but also investigates the domain of moral responsibility which is affected by controllability. As a result, the dimension of controllability in conjunction with previous research findings on causality allows a better understanding of the concept of responsibility.

The results of the present study support the hypothesis that controllability is positively correlated with the attribution of responsibility. The significant correlation between personal controllability and personal responsibility implies that when a worker is perceived to have high degree of volitional influence on the causes of his/her performance deficiency, he/she will also be personally held morally responsible for the poor performance. A positive

correlation between organizational controllability and organizational responsibility implies that the organization is being held morally responsible for the employee's performance deficit when the organization is seen as having control over the causes leading to employee's poor performance. The negative correlation between organizational controllability and personal responsibility indicates that when the employee is held responsible for his/her poor performance, the organization generally does not have a high degree of control over the causes. This negative correlation also suggests that when the organization is rated high on controllability, the employee is usually not being held morally responsible for the performance problem. The moderate positive relationship between the dimensions of controllability and responsibility suggests that the moral responsibility aspect of responsibility is positively related to the degree of controllability.

This study also sheds light on the dimensions in which responsibility attribution and controllability are assigned. The personal dimension and organizational dimension were placed in two separate continua instead of the each end of the same continuum. This allows responsibility or controllability to be attributed high or low both on the

person and organization scale. The moderate negative correlation between the personal responsibility and organizational responsibility supports the hypothesis that the person scale and the organization scale have an inverse relationship. In general, this implies that when responsibility is attributed high on the person scale, it will be ascribed low on the organization scale, or vise versa. However, the moderate negative relationship also indicates that there are times when both person and organization are rated high or low at the same time. In fact, 18% of the ratings show the person and the organization rated both high or low in responsibility attribution.

The result of this study does not show a significant relationship between the perception of responsibility and the emotional impact due to proposed corrective action. This is consistent with Mitchell's (1982) conclusion that there are many variables that may influence leader's corrective action, and attribution, which plays a minor role, is only one of the many contributors. Mitchell also stated that, "there were many settings where action may be simply determined by personal, social organizational policies. Attributions would be completely bypassed. In many other settings it appears that contextual, task,

perception of responsibility, social and cost/benefit type factors are as important or more important than attributions. Therefore, in many settings attributions may be weakly related to action at best." (Mitchell, 1982). Although causal attribution, perception of responsibility, and controllability do not each demonstrate significant relationship to corrective action, the investigations of these moderators provide the organizational researcher with a better understanding of the complexity of the attributional process in organizations.

Limitations and Future Research

The non-significant finding between responsibility and actions may also be due to the methodology of the present study. The participants were asked to give up to six reasons regarding the coworker's poor performance but only one corrective action. However, the proposed solution may correlate highly with one of the given responsibility attributions due to its saliency. Thus, the correlation may improve if participants are asked to provide corrective solutions for each responsibility attribution. This study represents the views of a biased sample of organization participants (e.g. those who seek further education), thus, the generalizability of the study's findings is limited.

The findings are also subject to common method bias due to a lack of independent observation of the participants at the work place. However, this study has made a contribution in exploring the aspects of controllability and responsibility attribution which had not been investigated in detail.

Future studies of attribution theory in an organizational context may be able to shed new insight through qualitative analysis of attributions and their effects on leader-subordinate interaction. Attribution is a complicated cognitive process which involves judgments of causality, responsibility, and blameworthiness. As a result, each perceiver's attributional process may differ enormously due to his/her phenomenological state and understanding of one's own and other's behavior. A qualitative study, thus, will allow the researcher to investigate the perceiver's phenomenological world and gain a better understanding of the attribution process as well as the interaction of the various moderators. Due to the complexity of the attributional process in organizations, it may also be a worthwhile endeavour for future studies to conduct meta-analysis of the various moderators and investigate their effect on leaders' decisions and corrective actions.

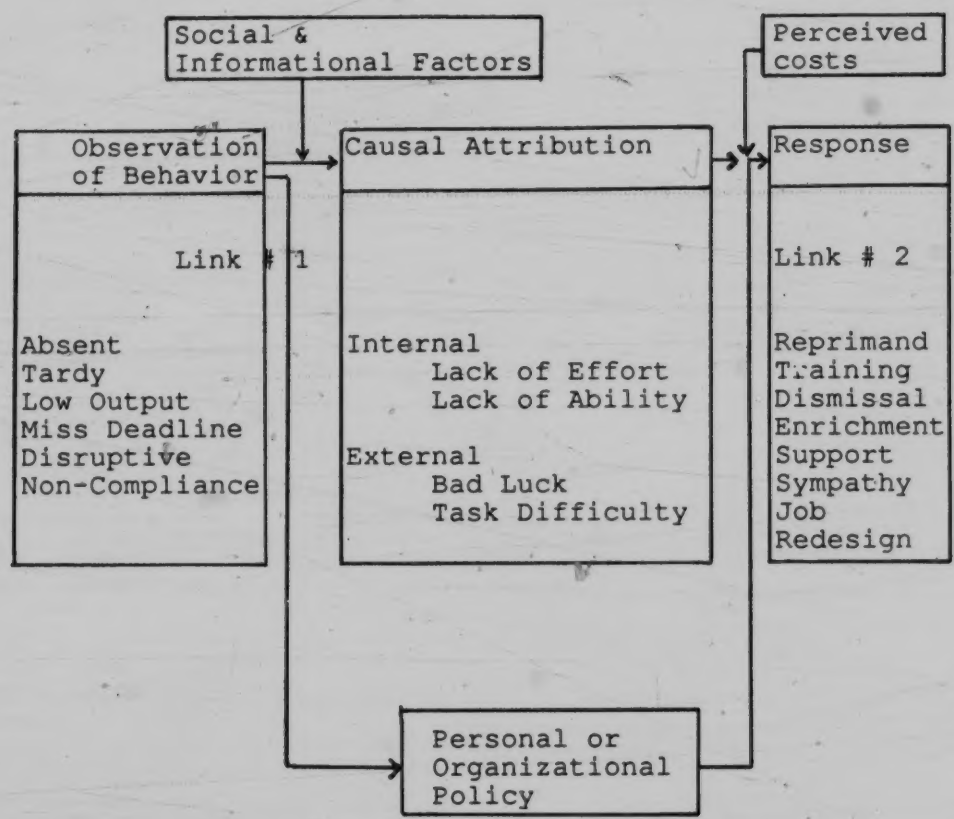
Table 1

PERSON		Controllability	Responsibility	Solution	
				1	2
Controllability		1	* .49	-.26	-.02
Responsibility		* .49	1	-.32	-.21
Solution	1	-.26	-.23	1	.52
	2	-.02	-.21	.52	1

ORGANIZATION		Controllability	Responsibility	Solution	
				1	2
Controllability		1	* .51	.22	.30
Responsibility		* .51	1	.19	.15
Solution	1	.22	.19	1	.51
	2	.30	.15	.51	1

Correlation Coefficients Between Responsibility, Controllability, and Emotional Impact Regarding Solution.

Figure 1



Mitchell's Attributional Model Of a Leader's Response to a Subordinate's Poor Performance.

Figure 2.

Causality	Responsibility	Action
(person) Internal	High degree of Control	Most Punitive
	Low degree of Control	↑
(Organization) External	Low degree of Control	Less Punitive

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APPENDIX 1

Reason #1 Weight ( ) _____

_____

_____

To what degree does this particular reason indicate that the person him/herself is responsible for the below par performance?

Not at all ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) Very Much
1 2 3 4 5

To what degree does this particular reason indicate that the management system (the job design, reward system, supervision, etc.) is responsible?

Not at all ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) Very Much
1 2 3 4 5

Reason #2 Weight ( ) _____

_____

_____

To what degree does this reason suggest that ...

The person is responsible Not at all ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) Very Much
1 2 3 4 5

The Mgmt. System is responsible Not at all ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) Very Much
1 2 3 4 5

Reason #3 Weight ( ) _____

_____

_____

To what degree does this reason suggest that ...

The person is responsible Not at all ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) Very Much
1 2 3 [illegible] 5

The Mgmt. System is responsible Not at all ( ) ( ) ([illegible] ( ) Very Much
1 2 3 [illegible] 5

Reason #4 Weight ( ) _____

_____

_____

To what degree does this reason suggest that ...

The person is responsible Not at all ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) Very Much
1 2 3 4 5

The Mgmt. System is responsible Not at all ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) Very Much
1 2 3 4 5

Reason #5 Weight ( ) _____

_____

_____

To what degree does this reason suggest that ...

The person is responsible Not at all ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) Very Much
1 2 3 4 5

The Mgmt. System is responsible Not at all ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) Very Much
1 2 3 4 5

Reason #6 Weight ( ) _____

_____

_____

To what degree does this reason suggest that ...

The person is responsible Not at all ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) Very Much
1 2 3 4 5

The Mgmt. System is responsible Not at all ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) Very Much
1 2 3 4 5

STEP 5: Describe specifically what the person does or does not do that leads to you seeing him or her as "not fully motivated."

_____

_____

_____

_____

STEP 6: Assuming complete freedom, power and resources, describe how you would improve the situation.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

STEP 7: What emotional impact is the solution you have suggested likely to have on the jobholder?

The immediate impact of this solution on the jobholder would probably be . . .

Very Negative	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	Very Positive
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5	

STEP 8: Assuming you are the supervisor but that you must operate in the reality of your organization, describe how you would improve the situation.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

The immediate impact of this solution on the jobholder would probably be . . .

Very Negative	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	Very Positive
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5	

STEP 9: Compared to other jobholders at the same level, is this person's performance:

( ) Well above average
( ) Somewhat above average
( ) About average
( ) Somewhat below average
( ) Well below average

STEP 10: Is the person's performance less than desired in all, some, or just a few areas of his or her job?

( ) This person could improve in all areas of his or her job.
( ) ... in most , but not all areas
( ) ... in a few areas
( ) ... in just one area

STEP 11: How long has this person's performance been less than desirable?

( ) More than 1 year
( ) For about 6 months to 1 year
( ) For about 3 to 6 months
( ) For the last few months only

STEP 12: Compare your general level of motivation (e.g., year in, year out overall motivation to perform; Do not just focus on a single or few areas of performance) with that of the person you selected for this exercise:

PERSON	MYSELF	Overall Performance is ...
( )	( )	Well above average
( )	( )	Somewhat above average
( )	( )	About average
( )	( )	Somewhat below average
( )	( )	Well below average

STEP 13: Complete the following four pieces of information.

Have you held the same position? ( ) Yes ( ) No

Are you the person's supervisor? ( ) Yes ( ) No

Are you a personal friend? ( ) Yes ( ) No

Is the person ( ) Male ( ) Female